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KT photo | **Tim Bath**
Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor

House of Burgess: Army deletes ‘Negro’ from manual

CNN report prompts apology, edit

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

Until Thursday, this is how the U.S. “Army Command Policy” defined “Black or African American” under the “race and ethnic code definitions” section heading: “A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa,” it read. “Terms such as ‘Haitian’ or ‘Negro’ can be used in addition to ‘Black’ or ‘African American.’”

This passage from the Oct. 22 edition of the text was highlighted in a Nov. 5 report by Barbara Starr, CNN Pentagon correspondent. After issuing an apology, the document [was hastily edited](#) by the Army Thursday.

“The racial definitions in AR600-20 [paragraph] 6-2 are outdated, currently under review, and will be updated shortly,” Lt. Col. S. Justin Platt, an Army spokesman, told CNN Nov. 5.

Curious, I attempted to view the uncorrected passage, but found it no longer available. However, using the magic of the Internet Archive, I found it. When I dug deeper, what I found was even more interesting.

I downloaded the version previous to this year’s edition, published March 18, 2008. And there it was again: the same offending language. I then went to the oldest version I could find, from May 13, 2002, and the word was gone.

Unless I’m missing something, this aberrant sentence had been on the books for at least six years and apparently hadn’t been an issue until CNN called it out.

Others in government have run into similar problems. After the publication of John Heilemann and Mark Halperin’s 2010 book “Game Change,” President Barack Obama accepted Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid’s public contrition for using the word.

“[Reid] was wowed by Obama’s oratorical gifts and believed that the country was ready to embrace a black presidential candidate, especially one such as Obama — a ‘light-skinned’ African American ‘with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one,’ as he said privately,” wrote Heilemann and Halperin.

In the book’s Afterword, reacting to the outcry, the authors maintained Reid, born in 1939, was not speaking with malice.

“Reid’s views about Obama, however poorly or carelessly expressed, were part of the basis for his early and enthusiastic, if secret, encouragement of a presidential bid by the younger man,” they wrote. “They were not meant to be derogatory in any way, and they surely were not racist. Quite the contrary.”

As I wrote in my Feb. 27, 2013, column, “Black history is American history,” it took until Feb. 25, 2013, for the Census Bureau to announce it had removed the word in its surveys. While conducting the 2010 census, the bureau had defended its choice.

“Many older African Americans identified themselves that way, and many still do,” Census Bureau spokesman Jack Martin told the New York Daily News Jan. 5, 2010. “Those who identify themselves as Negroes need to be included.”

Martin Luther King Jr. employed the word 16 times in his “I Have a Dream” speech Aug. 28, 1963. In the aftermath of the civil rights movement, though, “black,” and later, “African American,” came into fashion.

Even some long-running black institutions have continued utilizing such terminology in their names, including the United Negro College Fund, started in 1944. Going even further back, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People — founded in 1909 — has never altered its moniker.

“The term ‘colored’ is not derogatory,” Carla Sims, communications director for the NAACP in Washington, D.C., told the San Jose Mercury News’ Mario Savilla Nov. 12, 2008. “[The founders] chose the word ‘colored’ because it was the most positive description commonly used at that time. It’s outdated and antiquated, but not offensive.”

When public figures such as Reid and organizations like the Census Bureau and the Army step up and make amends, they are at least admitting their descriptive words have power. While people can call themselves whatever they want, we should address others however they feel most comfortable at the time. Intent and context count for a lot. Just watch it.

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